

## **inSocialWork Podcast Series**

### **Episode 231: Dr. Allan Barsky – Practice Standards on Social Work and Technology: Changes, Challenges, and Ongoing Debates.**

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.inSocialWork.org](http://www.inSocialWork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello and welcome to inSocialWork . This is Louanne Bakk and I'll be your host for this episode. The use of technology continues to increase within the field of social work and has had a considerable influence on micro, mezo, and macro level practice. There is a much greater reliance on digital and electronic options to deliver service through venues such as telephonic counselling, email, text messaging, videoconferencing as well as several other modalities. In this podcast Dr. Allan Barsky discusses recent updates and enhancements that were made to the practice standards involving the use of technology to help social workers manage risks and maximise benefits. Dr. Barsky highlights how the standards can provide guidance when utilizing technology interventions and in developing policies involving confidentiality and service delivery. He describes current disparities in technology access as well as how social workers can reduce these disparities through conversations with the community. Dr. Barsky concludes by emphasizing how technology and media can have both positive and negative implications and he encourages listeners to review the standards because they can provide a valuable framework to address benefits challenges and risks involving the use of technology. Dr. Allan Barsky is a professor with the Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work at Florida Atlantic University where he teaches ethics, conflict resolution, addictions, and generalist social work. Dr. Barsky chaired the NASW's Code of Ethics Review Task Force and was a member of the national taskforce on practice standards for social work and technology. He was interviewed in November 2017 by Karen Zgoda who is a Ph.D. student in public policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

[00:02:59] Hello my name is Karen Zgoda. I am a Ph.D. student in public policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston. I'm actually a guest interviewer today for the inSocialWork podcast and have participated in a couple of other inSocialWork podcasts because of my work with social work and technology. A note for listeners you may hear me drop my "r's" a lot. I do live in Boston or lived in Boston for nearly 20 years. My goal will be to reduce said a little bit although it's a great trick to pull out at par ties. I'd like to introduce Alan Barsky.

[00:03:31] Good day. My name is Alan Barsky and I am a professor at the Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work and Boca Raton at Florida Atlantic University. I was also on the task force that developed the practice standards on technology and social work practice. I'm not representing any of these organizations today but just on my own behalf.

[00:03:52] Fantastic. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what was that national task force on social work and technology? How did you get involved?

[00:04:01] Thank you. The task force was a combined task force of the four largest social work organizations in the United States and it's the first time that these four organizations actually got together to develop practice standards on any sorts of policy. So it's the National Association of Social Workers, The Association of Social Work Boards, The Council on Social Work Education, and The Clinical Social Work Association. And so each of the organizations appointed people to participate in this task force. And the idea was that we wanted to get really broad support and buy in and input from as many types of social organizations. There were practice standards that t the NASW and ASWV created in 2005 on technology and social work and there was a decision among

all of the organisations that those standards were very dated. Now I have been participating on the national ethics committee of NASW since 2007 and in handling cases and also in speaking to various mental health and social work organisations around the country. It was really obvious that there were some challenges in the way that people were using technology and different types of practice so when this opportunity came up and I was invited to participate I thought this would be a great way to help provide those workers with more guidance on what types of technology are available. What are some of the positive uses of technology and what are some considerations that social workers look at when they're trying to use new technology or new applications of technology.

[00:05:34] Now that I think is a really interesting point. How do you actually view the role of technology in what we're sort of calling modern social work practice.

[00:05:42] You know it's funny that we sometimes think of technology as new so I think since the beginning of social work we've actually had some forms of technology picking up a pen and putting it on paper and writing notes as a form of technology. Speaking on the phone is making use of a form of technology you could even argue that play therapy and art therapy we're using different types of technology so I don't think the technology itself is new but there's certainly been an explosion of different types of technology and it's not really a question anymore of if social workers use technology but rather how we blend technology in with various forms of social work practice so sometimes it's used to enhance communication. Sometimes it's used to store gather and accessed data. Sometimes the technology is actually part of the intervention itself so I think we need to look at technology in very broad terms look at all the potential benefits and uses that it can have in various aspects of practice.

[00:06:39] I think those are excellent points you sort of remind me of some fears that some folks had initially had when one of our more recent disruptive technologies, smartphones were introduced and people were scared that everyone was going to be looking into their phones all the time and then you can look back 100 years ago and see those photos of people holding up newspapers on a subway and nobody's talking to each other. They're all looking at the newspapers so at that time that newspaper was a disruptive technology and we weren't talking to other people except usually on our phones. Now we're actually using those devices mostly to talk to other people which I think is kind of fascinating.

[00:07:12] Absolutely. There's ways that we can make use of our cell phones in ways that are going to be more beneficial and reduce the risks and there's ways that we could you know increase the risk. So you know the advent of cell phones may have meant that you know we've got the mobility and we can speak anywhere anytime to anyone. But in terms of confidentiality maybe we need to look around and even have our clients look around. Is this a good place for me to be having this conversation.

[00:07:39] Exactly, exactly, so I spend roughly I believe about ten years since the first technology started entering introduced by NASW. What do you see as one of the biggest changes to the standards in this round.

[00:07:51] So one of the things that we've done this time around is I think we've gone into greater depth. You'll see that there are standards and then interpretations of standards and in the prior one that just had the standards themselves but not the interpretations interpretations allowed us to go into greater depth. And it's really important for people to look at the language that's used so a lot of times when there is a particular issue raised since confidentiality or informed consent or boundary issues. We don't prescribe to people what they should do how they should act but it asks people to be aware of certain issues and when they're using their discretion to be concerned and be aware about both the benefits and the risks and using technology in different ways. That's one piece that's

different. Another piece that's different is just the way that it's divided out into four areas. So one area on technology and social work education really wasn't present in the 2005 standards. The other areas that we've peeled out is there's the first section is on providing information to the public will back in 2005 in a few years prior when the practice standards were being developed. We didn't have or we were just at the beginning of having Facebook and various other forms of online social media. And so now just the explosion of the use and the adaptations of use and professional purposes it required a lot of consideration about you know what are some of the things that could provide social workers with guidance and also to provide guidance to their agencies and their clients. You'll see that there's a number of places in the code or in the practice standards where we're actually encouraging social workers to create policies around certain issues and social workers if they're working in large organizations they can't develop those policies alone.

[00:09:37] So they need to bring these standards to their colleagues and their agencies to think about well what would a good social media policy be in this circumstance or if there's some sort of disruption in services. How can we as an organization not just me as a professional be certain that we have a backup plan also and so far it's really helpful to hear you sort of explain it and sort it out a little bit. One of the things that you sort of talked about was how we're trying to use the standards to build awareness of some of the situations that some of these newer technologies may provide. So for example you brought up a social worker talking to a client on their cell phone in a crowded area but that is something that will need to be aware of. Can you talk about some of the most important areas of guidance for social workers who are using technology and social work with say individuals, families, and groups.

[00:10:27] This includes the second part of the standards. It has two sections. One is specifically for interventions on the micro level individuals families and groups or micro and mezo and then another section that's related more to the macro. One of the areas that I think's helpful for people to look at is in terms of informed consent. So historically when we provide informed consent with our clients we have a discussion about the types of services that we're providing. And so if I were providing additional counseling I might talk about what's the difference between cognitive behavioral or produce a solution focused approach moderate use approach versus an abstinence approach. And we talked about the nature of the services. What are the advantages what are the disadvantages risks of each of them and we'd allow the client to have some choice. Now in addition to the specific model of intervention if we're using technology to help facilitate the communication process or maybe use technology is actually part of the intervention process. We should involve informed consent as well. I don't know that some agencies have really thought that out. I've worked with a number of agencies are my students have in the field where they've gone away from in person meetings strictly to use video conferencing or online technologies. And so they're not really giving clients a choice anymore. So if an agency is not going to provide that sort of choice with then their agency anymore they should at least do some sort of assessment of you know what type of services are best for a particular client and it may actually be that the use of technology is superior to in person. But we should still be attentive to both the benefits and the risks of in person versus technology and give people choices and try to facilitate access to services. We're not providing them in our own practices.

[00:12:19] I think what you say is really interesting I think of living here in Boston where the right time of day if you're trying to drive seven miles they can take you an hour or an hour and a half. So I think sometimes I think of technology in terms of why wouldn't that make my life so much better to cut out this commuting and then I think about the implications as you say for education or for field practice where you know some of our students some of our programs are located in these very rural areas or we even have some students who may be active duty military members and they can still participate in different sessions in social work practice either as a student or as someone who needs those services as a client wherever they're at. As long as they do have that cell phone

connection then it's kind of I think an amazing time to be in social work. Even though I think we're still sorting some of these things out I think some of those possibilities to extend our practice and really help people in any way can be really fantastic.

[00:13:13] Absolutely we believe in access to services and technology can be wonderful in terms of access to services. So you mentioned continuity of services when people move to different locations. And also think of access to services for people with disabilities and so there's a lot of technology that can help people who are blind people who are deaf people who have various sorts of physical impairments or even psychological impairment. So think of the client who has social anxiety and would find it difficult to travel to an office for person treatment but would be able to have treatment at home and eventually work towards being able to go out into the community more. I'm really excited to see social workers sort of take this and run with this in the future. To that extent I wonder we talk a little bit about sort of micro social work practice. Can you discuss a little bit maybe some of the most important implications of the standards for macro practice some of the practice you're doing with your communities or policy your advocacy different settings like that.

[00:14:15] So let me actually pick out a particular standard 2.01. So part two all the two points whatever. Those are the ones that are particular to intervention and this one talks about the appropriate boundaries. So the basic standard is social work who work with communities and organizations shall maintain appropriate boundaries when they use technology. Well that's really a duplication or maybe a little bit of a gist of what's already in the code of ethics that we need have appropriate boundaries in our work. One thing that the code of ethics doesn't do is it doesn't really distinguish what's an appropriate boundary and clinical social work versus community or macro social work. So the interpretation gives some guidance on those types of issues. And one of the picking out I think a fairly controversial area is what sort of guidance do we give social workers in terms of how they become involved in online advocacy online community organization online macro work in a way that gives them freedom of expression allows them to pursue whatever causes that they think are appropriate but also makes sure that they're attentive to what our core social work principles and values are. And so just in terms of you know the affiliations that we have we should be aware that once we start to communicate with groups that are organized around a particular political party or around a particular type of political cause that's going to affect how clients and future clients may perceive us and be able to work with us.

[00:15:47] So if we're doing community organization we may be participating in online communities in blogs and other types of technology with a broad range of people from the community. What should we keep as part of our professional life? What should we try to keep separate as part of our personal life and the types of boundaries that we have in community work may have those types of areas blurred. I do a lot of advocacy with the LGBT community. I'm not going to hide that but I really need to be aware of the types of groups that I associate with is going to have an impact on how people perceive me and want to work with me in the future and what I write I'm guessing you may discover you may have already discovered that people will probably start to seek you out more because in some ways you are vocal about that particular area of expertise. There are going to be clients who are going to be like you know what I just really want someone with that experience or this background under this orientation or this understanding of some of the things that I may be going through and that may actually become I don't want to see a selling point. But it may become very attractive to certain clients who are really looking for that. When I work with students particularly undergraduate social work students on these issues one of the first things I do is actually have them watch some videos from the show Ellen and she does a great job of saying this in 10 minutes for me of showing you know some Facebook posts and social media posts were some of her staff members and you know having students spend 10 minutes watching a video like that forces them to be like OK what exactly am I putting out there in the world what could someone find and they go home and they cleanse all their profiles from all the

social media a little bit to say what it is that they want people to be finding out about them. And that's one thing that I tend to encourage with students as well what are the things you want clients to learn about. Do you want them to understand that you bring a certain perspective a certain view of expertise things like that to your practice. And the one guideline I've always told them is you know if you want to see something that you say printed in The New York Times or you want your family to read it that's a strong sense that this is something that you're passionate about and there's a way to talk about that in a way that I think is proactive. For example that there's an issue you care about you're able to share the research that you think is really important or if you find some really good examples other people can learn from there's a way to sort of develop this public expertise in a scope which wasn't really possible 10 years ago which I think presents some challenges but it's also a really exciting opportunity especially once we figure that out a little bit more slowly.

[00:18:24] So the types of you know connections that we can make not just with people within our own communities but people in rural and remote communities people overseas you know again just with LGBT communities you know some people in some countries just may not have access to the various types of supports that we may have here. So connecting them we're having given the opportunity to see who they could be connected to can be a real advantage. At the same time people need to be aware of that the context in that other country is different so that a person say in Russia who starts connecting with LGBT organizations within their country or internationally could be putting themselves at risk because there are laws that criminalize that type of activity. Part of it is really informed consent not just with clinical clients but with community clients. We could get all excited about the types of blogs and videos that we're posting on YouTube or whatever they can have ramifications for people. So if you're doing videos then you're going to be very identifiable not just by name but also by face. And is that something that you want to carry with you. Once it's out there it's out there and you may not be able to control who uses it. Well into the future. So again we may be responsible with working with various groups for helping people to make truly informed decisions.

[00:19:44] Exactly. There's that additional layer of responsibility I think one of the standards talks about how the things that we create you know we can't control how long they last or who gets to use them like that. There was even true with some of the research that we might do in social work. And I think sometimes with the ease of technology it's very easy to sit down and do a status update. I think it's important to really be cognizant of some of the responsibilities that that voice has. Like yes you have a voice you can actualize 24/7 and it can reach a global audience. What are the ways in which we're using that voice to the best of our ethical ability to make sure that you know the people in the communities we care about are still comfortable and protected. You know we have to take reasonable steps to look at what's out there. You know let's put in our voice or is put in the voice of our agencies or social work. We can't control everything that's out there. And we also know when these days of you know fake news and Photoshop and all of these things people could take our videos and our research and our blogs out of context and use them for different purposes so you know we can't be responsible for everything. But there may be ways that we can try to be aware of those issues. Ask for corrections try to make sure that the information that we do put out there is as accurate as possible and because we've got some politicians and because we have some other advocates out there who are saying well we can say you know anything we want about anything and it doesn't matter for telling the truth or lying. Because you know we just want to push our cause with social workers. I think we need to put ourselves to a higher standard. And yes the cause is important the end is important but we want to make sure that we act with integrity. So we will be as honest and accurate as we can and will pursue our causes hard. But let's do it with integrity.

[00:21:29] Integrity, it also sounds like some transparency as well I think it's super important. These are the steps that we have taken to make sure that we have the best possible outcomes.

[00:21:39] That makes a lot of sense.

[00:21:41] So to that end what disparities do you still see remaining regarding technology access, adoption, application?

[00:21:48] So one thing we like to do in social work is build on the strengths. So one of the things that's actually happened is more and more people have access to technology than in the past used to be that technology was not something that everyone could have if you were talking about say computers not everybody had their own computer these days more and more people have an iPhone or a different type of smartphone. And they're very powerful devices and it gives people a voice it gives people the power of access to information that gives people the power to promote whatever their concerns are advocate for themselves with agencies et cetera. So in some ways the technological divide hasn't gotten worse in other ways it has. So we need as social workers I think as part of our assessment process we're very good at doing comprehensive bio-psycho-social evaluations with clients. One of the things that we should be looking at is relationships with technology. So do the people that we're serving have access to technology not just ownership of devices but can they afford to purchase the services or the licenses to the services that they need. How adept are they at making use of the different types of technology and we sometimes make some assumptions about well you know younger people they're very adept at it and older people not so much. I think we have to be careful with that there's many people who are elderly who have embraced various forms with technology feel very comfortable with it and no major problems. And there's also people at the younger end of the age scale who may not have access to technology or may not be as comfortable with it. So part of the dealing with disparities is working with clients on a case by case basis. The other thing that I think we don't often talk about in terms of disparities is disparities between agencies. Some agencies are well equipped with technology. Others not so much. And I work with an MSW students some of whom were asked to bring their own technology to work not just their cell phones but also their computers. And I think it's really not a great model for agencies to be saying to people you know we're going to rely on your private technology and your private accounts.

[00:23:59] That is a lot of issues that could be brought up very easily. But I think it's really interesting that you say there in terms of the differences between different agencies I think that's something that doesn't get talked about a lot.

[00:24:11] I think partly it depends on the type of social work practice that you're doing. It's still very possible to have low tech practice and do really effective work so we don't know that we need everybody to have the same degree of tech knowledge in the same degree of wanting to do the most cutting edge type of work. So I think there's always going to be a place for person social work without a lot of technology. And I've gone around the country talking to groups and a lot of people in private practice they don't necessarily see the benefit of using these different types of technology so it may be that it's some generational issues that may be that. So it depends on need in some case it may depend on access to different types of resources. That said we've got some social workers who are very creative very forward thinking they're willing to take some risks and they're willing to you know see what works and what doesn't work. So I think the creativity within the field is fantastic. I really encourage social workers to work with computer scientists I.T. people engineering people. If you look at the a lot of the apps that are being developed for people with psychosocial issues or to improve their psychosocial well being a lot of it is being built by people with tech backgrounds and with business backgrounds not necessarily by people with mental health and social work background so I see real opportunities to work together and we haven't always talked about interprofessional in terms of social workers working with business and tech folks.

[00:25:46] I think that's so fascinated with such a great area to go into. To that end. How else do

you see social workers should be continuing to work to produce some of these disparities?

[00:25:56] I think going back to the clients sometimes let's look at our client as communities so rather than we say OK this is how we need to approach this disparity. Why don't we work with communities and help them decide what would be most advantageous for them. So here in Florida we had you know hurricanes recently and one of the major internet providers just said we're going to make the whole state a hotspot. And so any of your you know access to your own cell phones or computers or whatever we're going to create a hotspot and we're going to have places where people can go and you'll be able to find out you know how your friends are doing or be able to tell people that you're OK or you're in need or whatever. Well why can't we do that with communities and say OK what is it that you need. What are some of the concerns that you have and they may not want to hotspots some people may be concerned that you know they're getting some sort of radiation or something that's negative. So let's work with the populations and them look at what types of they need access to and what would be the best way to help them to access it.

[00:26:58] For example I can throw out a local example my neighborhood that I live in and Boston has an extremely active Facebook page. If I want to know what's going on in my neighborhood I know that I have to go to that Facebook. That is the technology that they are comfortable with that is how they choose to interact with one another.

[00:27:15] Great example. And if you're working with the younger kids they'll say oh the Facebook is so 2014, Snapchat or whatever the latest program is yes there's always new things you'd be surprised me when see the older adult walking around with their Apple Watch playing with Apple Pay and it's just like you know what let's not have those stereotypes.

[00:27:37] Absolutely. So is there anything else that you want to make sure that some folks who will be listening to this. Any takeaways you want them to have any sort of things that maybe we hadn't talked about that you wanted to bring up her make sure to highlight at this point.

[00:27:52] I think one of the things social workers can look at is having a social media policy or an electronic or even just all types of communication type of policy. So if you're working with clients and they say weekly basis but they want to communicate with you in between sessions what would be the expectation for how they can communicate with you and what would be the expectation in terms of how quickly you would respond to them. And so in this day and age you know people think that if I e-mail or text that's appropriate and that I should be able to expect a response within minutes if not within 24 hours. Well some of us may want to provide that. Some of us may not want to provide it or we need to consider some of the laws like the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act which may say that you know certain types of communication have to have a higher level of protection around confidentiality. So letting clients know that it's ok maybe to schedule appointments online through text messaging but it's not really OK to go into the depth of what the particular issues are or making sure that people know what emergency services are available or for working across state lines. What is some of the entire jurisdictional issues would we have to know in terms of the laws where I'm located. Would you have to know in terms of where the clients are located and we sometimes assume that the laws that govern social work are child protection or adult guardianship are the same across states. But there's really some considerable differences. And so now that we've opened up the possibility to provide remote services around the globe we need to help educate people who are providing those services to know not just the laws but also cultural competence issues so I may be able to provide services to a person in Uganda but I know enough about the cultural context to do that in a competent manner.

[00:29:41] And it might even make sense to have that conversation with a client. You know I'm not 100 percent sure about all the things I should be aware of in your culture. Can you help me learn or

direct me to resources to sense something you're able right.

[00:29:56] So you're discussing what goes to the concept of cultural humility not going in thinking that we know everything but how do we find out it's the client is a great source of information. But we also need to know what our limits are around cultural competence and when it's more appropriate to refer people to somebody else. So I don't know that you know people are going to pick up our technology standards and memorize them but hopefully they're a resource that people can pick up and look at and maybe they can apply. And even if they don't like them you know critique them and write articles and put the information out there and participate in discussions with people so one of the things that I think has been great about the technology standards is that so many people have been discussing. We have standards on various types of practice and you know whether it's child welfare end of life decision making nursing homes. There's one on cultural competence and many social workers don't know about them or don't really access them. So I really would encourage people to take a look at the various practice standards especially those that are most pertinent to the type of work that you're doing and engage people in these discussions. Are those people who like to provide continuing education programs you know this is a good source of material for that as well.

[00:31:08] And that's an excellent point. And like you say I think it is a fantastic consideration for continuing conversation because we're going to bring those new expertise. Fantastic.

[00:31:18] Anything else you would like to share today with the listeners of the podcast just want to you know encourage people to check out the standards and also to look at the revisions to the NASW code of ethics. The new code is enforceable or effective as of January 1st. And there are a number of changes to the code that pertain particularly to technology but there's a couple of others that pertain to some other areas of practice. The general code is the same. We've got the same values and principles and same sections but there are 19 new additions and 19 other amendments.

[00:31:54] So I look forward to reading those as well.

[00:31:56] All right. Well I appreciate your conducting this interview and presents the opportunity to share some of the insights on the technology standards.

[00:32:03] Thank you. This has been so helpful for me I'm sure you hope thousands of other social workers as well.

[00:32:09] You've been listening to Dr. Allan Barsky's discussion on practice standards and social work and technology. I'm Louanne Bakk. Please join us again at inSocialWork.

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